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Symbolism and Resilience in the Aftermath of a Destructive Volcanic Eruption

Samuel Weeks and Vitor Popinsky

On the afternoon of November 23, 2014, we were working on tasks related to the fieldwork we conducted in Chã das Caldeiras from 2006 until 2013. Commonly known as “Chã,” this community is located inside the crater of the Pico do Fogo, the 2,829-meter volcano on the island of Fogo in the West African republic of Cape Verde. Awful news reached us via social media: After 19 years of being dormant, Fogo’s volcano had started to erupt.

During the coming days, we followed intently the reports of the evacuation effort and the whereabouts of the expanding lava field. Initial hopes that the flow would not damage the village and its surrounding farmland were quickly dashed. A week into the eruption, lava submerged the recently inaugurated headquarters of the Fogo National Park and was threatening to engulf Portela, the larger of Chã’s two neighborhoods. After a day of cautious optimism, during which the spread of the lava had slowed considerably, the village’s inhabitants confronted a horrible...
reality: A new lava flow had picked up force and was headed squarely in the direction of both Portela and Bangaeira, which is Chã’s other neighborhood. By December 7, 2014, this entire village — previously home to some 700 inhabitants — had been destroyed.

From the beginning of the eruption, a series of questions began to emerge in the news and on social media. People asked why residents would stay in Chã if they knew that disaster was imminent, how they coped and made sense of the eruption and whether they would return to Chã now that the volcanic activity had stopped. In an effort to address these and other questions, we will share our understanding of why people initially decided to settle in this seemingly hostile place. We will compare a previous eruption in 1995 with the one in 2014 in order to discuss the bond that exists between the people of Chã and the volcano. We also will attempt to characterize how residents and commentators have conceptualized and explained the reasons behind the recent eruption, using information presented in the news and on social media. Finally, we will consider the likelihood that most residents currently displaced from Chã will disobey government orders and return to living inside the crater. We believe that figuratively picking through
the embers and rubble that now make up Chã is a necessary step to further comprehending how victims of this disaster come to understand the misfortune they face.

“The Volcano — It’s Our Friend”

Chã das Caldeiras, the region inside Fogo’s active volcanic crater, was still unpopulated at the beginning of the 20th century, even though it was long known that the area possessed reliable water sources and rich soil, two rarities in arid Cape Verde. The greatest obstacle to settlement in Chã was undoubtedly the fear of eruptions, which had occurred regularly since the settlement of Fogo in the late 15th century. From the mid-19th to the early 20th centuries, however, the volcano remained unusually dormant, which reduced the fear of eruptions among the inhabitants of Fogo. A few pioneering families with no firsthand knowledge of previous eruptions settled in Chã in order to graze their livestock and grow crops in the fertile volcanic soil.

While these first residents undoubtedly knew that they were vulnerable to potential eruptions, they persisted in living inside the crater. One local explanation for this paradox is that the volcano is “like a friend.” According to this line of thinking, even if eruptions destroy homes or farmland, in the end the volcano always “gives more than it takes,” as Chã native Teodoro told the newspaper A Semana. This personification of the volcano as a benevolent friend seems to be reinforced during eruptions. The Pico do Fogo is a low-intensity Strombolian-type volcano, meaning that local residents will have some warning before the eruption begins. The testimony of a long-time inhabitant of Chã reflects local sentiment when he notes that “the volcano is more a friend to man than man is his friend … He [the volcano] warns us before the eruption, so we can get out of Chã.”

The 1995 Eruption and Its Aftermath

Such a warning did, in fact, precede the 1995 eruption, which began on April 2, an otherwise normal day. Later that night, lava began to spew from Pico Pequeno, a smaller crater adjacent to the main volcano. After residents had removed as many belongings as they could from their modest homes, a few remaining inhabitants witnessed the eruption from an elevated point nearby. Firsthand accounts describe the event with mixed feelings, as something both magnificently beautiful and awesomely destructive. Adding to the drama during the eruption was an official decree announcing that the government would commence building houses for the people of Chã outside of their crater home. This worrisome ruling notwithstanding, the end of the 1995 eruption reportedly brought relief, even elation. The Portela and Bangaeira neighborhoods were spared destruction, though some property owners did see their agricultural lands covered by lava.

As time passed and the lava cooled, evacuees from Chã became eager to return to their homes, fields and livestock. They were shocked and angry when the Cape Verdean government further declared that the people of Chã could not go back to living inside the crater. To compensate, the government hastily constructed houses for residents in two
villages outside the volcano. Left with few alternatives, many moved into these homes, but they quickly realized that this new life would be nearly impossible as they would have no access to farmland or pasture areas. To make matters worse, rumors swirled alleging that the government wanted to relocate Chã's population in order to construct a luxury tourist resort. These allegations prompted a few intrepid locals to flout the government decree and return to their homes and fields in Chã. When the remaining population followed suit, the government relented on its ban.

Against all odds, the post-1995 lives of Chã’s residents began to improve. In this re-
gard, the volcano was again their “friend.” The end of the 1990s and the beginning of the new century brought the development of new economic activities, namely tourism and viniculture. In the process, Chã became one of the most recognized places in Cape Verde. The 1995 eruption provided the two elements necessary to develop these industries: infrastructural improvements and international visibility. As the number of people visiting the crater increased, local families began adding rooms to their homes in order to accommodate tourists, who hailed primarily from France and Germany. The more adventurous of these visitors came to hike the volcano, with its spectacular views of the crater wall, surrounding areas and the nearby Island of Santiago. Accordingly, young men and a few women from Chã became the village’s first guides, leading tourists up the treacherous trail to the summit of the volcano. Another significant post-1995 development was the construction of a new cooperative wine cellar. Aided by Italian specialists, this project helped to commercialize local wine-making and, as a result, prompted the farmers of Chã to increase their cultivation of vines. At harvest time, the grapes were bought by the cooperative and made into export-quality wines to sell throughout Cape Verde and abroad.

Perhaps the most significant post-1995 addition to Chã was the Fogo National Park headquarters, inaugurated in March 2014 to great fanfare, including a visit from the prime minister of Cape Verde. A team of Portuguese architects designed the headquarters, paying homage to the U-shape of the crater. Locals constructed it using — in what would become a tragic irony — volcanic materials. Sadly, this majestic building was the first to be destroyed in the recent eruption.

Figure 4. Three locals pruning grapevines. Courtesy Vitor Popinsky.
Local Understandings of the 2014 Eruption

The 2014 eruption of the Pico do Fogo has amounted to an acute existential challenge for the residents of Chã das Caldeiras. The lava flows were significantly larger and stronger than during previous volcanic activity. The newly paved road leading into the community and dozens of acres of prime farmland were destroyed. More devastating, the densely populated Portela and Bangaeira neighborhoods are now submerged under three meters of lava, in contrast to earlier volcanic events that merely skirted the residential parts of the village. Effectively, the people of Chã have become “landless, homeless and jobless at once.”

To focus attention on how Chã’s residents (and others) are making sense of a calamity that has brought them such anguish and suffering, we will highlight themes that have recurred in responses to the eruption by locals and observers alike, as documented in press accounts and on social media. The people of Chã know very well that there is a geological basis for volcanism, but they also bring notions of causality rooted in spiritual, alle-
gorical and symbolic realms to bear on their understanding of volcanic phenomena. The men and women we know from the village, some of whom are speaking out publically today, negotiate numerous understandings of the recent tragic events that point to a long-standing entanglement of scientific and symbolic explanations for volcanic activity on Fogo.

As noted by researchers of other volcanic eruptions, the descriptions of victims commonly feature analogy, which helps survivors to contextualize these extraordinary and calamitous occurrences. Likewise, employing metaphor, personification and even the supernatural sets the events apart from the happenings of everyday life. In the case of Chã, volcanic flows became frentes (phalanxes), lava veias de fogo (veins of fire) and the eruption site a colosso (colossus). Water symbolism was also common, particularly when used to describe the destructive movements of lava: torrente (gushing), corrente (a current), ondas (waves) and mar (a sea).

More systematic were a number of frameworks providing not only descriptions of the recent tragic events but also some explanations for them. The two most notable of these resonate with the binary oppositions “nature versus culture” and “destruction versus rebuilding.” These are indicative of the struggle among Chã’s residents to situate the eruption — an incident challenging both experience and comprehension — within a conceptual system that can provide some “reasons” for its occurrence.

Regarding the first framework, survivors and commentators immediately cast the volcanic activity as a “natural” phenomenon. Speaking to A Semana, Chã native Carla stated that she did not blame the volcano for destroying her home because such events “are simply a part of nature.” While on the one hand residents cast the eruption as being wild and uncontrollable, on the other they stressed how this act of “nature” is somehow necessary to foster human life and culture in Chã. A striking example of this sentiment is found in a June 2015 posting on the Facebook page of Alcindo, a well-known local guide: “I am from Chã and I discovered that in my veins is lava that flows and in my heart is fire (flame) that makes me get out of bed every morning.”

Combining these two characteristics, journalist Nicolau Centeio spoke of the volcano’s nature to both remove and provide culture: “The volcano gives, the volcano takes away … It gave the soils in which one of Cape Verde’s richest agricultural and tourist areas flourished. [But it also] took away everything in recent hours, consuming slowly infrastructure, houses and farmland. We should all remember that before Nature we are nothing” (emphasis added). From these examples, one can see how those implicated in the eruption have in part removed “nature” from blame, citing instead its vital role in sustaining the “culture” of Chã das Caldeiras.

The second explanatory framework of note, destruction versus rebuilding, depicts in an alternating fashion the volcano as either a destroyer or a creator. As understood by survivors and national media observers alike, the 2014 eruption represents one of the dividing lines that periodically mark the end of one era in Chã and the beginning of another. After the total destruction wrought by the recent eruption, the people of Chã have now begun to “rebuild” their lives — at first,
through speech acts. Seemingly every verb we found in media accounts was preceded by the prefix “re.” In a posteruption interview with A Semana, poet José Luís Tavares spoke of Chã’s plight precisely in these terms: “There is … an uncommon tenacity in those people of Chã and, at the same time, and infinite innocence that leads them to believe that however destructive nature can be … there will always be strength and motives for a new fresh start [um novo recomeço]. That is why [you have] the recurrence of certain motives … such as renewal [renovo].” (emphases added).

Appearing in the newspaper A Nação, a profile of Chã hoteliers Marisa and Mustafa poignantly titled “To Be Born Again [Renacer] from the Lava” features similar “rebuilding” imagery. “[The couple] lost everything in the November 23 eruption. The wrath of the lavas took from them [their only] two guesthouses … Nevertheless, Marisa and Mustafa do not want to turn their backs on Chã das Caldeiras or its people. They have made up their minds: they want to return to investing in Chã” (emphases added). In these and other examples, destruction and rebuilding oscillate in a dialectical fashion; one is thought to give way to the other, and
vice versa. Even as the recent eruption has resulted in utter devastation for Chã’s residents, reconstruction is very much on their minds. So the cycle continues.

The final noteworthy trope we found in personal and journalistic responses to the eruption can be referred to as supernatural personification. In the case of Chã, the erupting volcano has been called a gigante (giant), a Homem Grande (Big Man) and a colosso (colossus), all uncontainable figures who have “consumed houses,” “swallowed the school and a hotel,” “cleansed an entire line of dwellings” and “climbed to the other side of the village.” As has been documented by other researchers, such motifs are common in the aftermath of destructive volcanic activity, a metaphoric way of “bounding uncertainty.” Accordingly, the use of such devices reflects the work of survivors to transform an unknowable, unpredictable disaster into a mythical figure possessing human characteristics as universal as rage, vengeance and authority. To quote A Semana: “And the volcano wakes up again, almost two decades after [its last eruption, in 1995]. It awoke practically without providing a warning, bringing with it the fury [a ira] of a giant who has at its feet a fragile and needy village” (emphasis added). Thus, evading...
measures to foretell its coming, the giant — like the erupting volcano — arrives only to vanish quickly thereafter, leaving in its stead the near-total destruction that the people of Chã must now confront.

The Outlook for Chã

Only time will tell whether the people of Chã will return to living inside the crater. As we see it, however, what has happened in Chã since late 2014 resembles the maneuvering and civil disobedience that took place after the 1995 eruption. Thus, we are confident in making some predictions about what might take place in the near future. Even as the injunction against people returning to live in Chã remains in force, inhabitants are already trickling back into the crater from the miserable nearby “evacuation centers” in order to harvest crops, feed livestock and build new overnight dwellings in their remaining fields. This return is akin to the situation in 1995. Although there is still no consensus on the outlook for Chã, the government has been floating plans about building a new community at the edge of the crater for the displaced
residents. While some have expressed support for this option, others are explicit and adamant about their desire to return to the heart of the crater, near the now-submerged village of Chã. Recent evidence on social media sites and from other media is strongly inclined toward this position. An example of this sentiment can be seen in the trailer to the upcoming documentary *O Regresso dos Filhos do Vulcão* (*The Return of the Volcano’s Children*). “[Chã residents] must return to rebuild their houses on top of the lava,” proclaims a local woman. The ban in 1995 did not stop the people of Chã from returning to their beloved crater, the narrative goes, and accordingly there is no reason why this cannot happen again. “The way things are going, it will not be long until Chã das Caldeiras returns to being populated by people and houses, in a rewriting of history from 1995,” asserts Nicolau Centeio in *A Semana*. To conclude, we cite a December 2014 message that the guide Alcindo wrote on his Facebook page, which reflects the intimate and steadfast bond that the residents of Chã have toward their volcano home:

Today we went to feed our animals in Chã, so that they don’t starve to death.

Why is it now that when we enter Chã we are considered terrorists, or that we are to blame for the volcanic eruption?

The children of Chã are living a difficult moment but we keep our heads up. We know that today we are [outside the crater], but we are hoping to return to Chã tomorrow.

We thank all of you for the moral support you have given us, but we just want something that is simple and easy:

THAT THE AUTHORITIES STOP FRIGHTENING THE POPULATION AND LET US GO IN AND OUT OF CHÃ WHENEVER WE WANT.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. This process was a “success” in that there would be no loss of life from the eruption.
4. Vera Alfama, Alberto Mota Gomes and José Brilha, *Guia Geoturístico da Ilha do Fogo* (Coimbra, Portugal: Department of Life Sciences, University of Coimbra, 2008), 55.
5. Information about the 1995 earthquake was collected in Chã by the authors from 2006 to 2013.


10. Note that the Portuguese word for “fire” (“fogo”) is also the name of Fogo, the island in Cape Verde where the volcano and Chã das Caldeiras are located.


15. E.g., Cashman and Cronin, “Welcoming a Monster to the World.”


Suggestions for Further Reading


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**Vitor Popinsky** is a doctoral candidate in social anthropology at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon (Portugal). His dissertation research took place in Chã das Caldeiras (Fogo, Cape Verde) and addresses topics such as kinship and family organization, land ownership and use, the reproduction of domestic groups and issues surrounding “race.” Popinsky has also carried out research in Mozambique on the HIV and AIDS epidemics and on the National Reserve of Gilé as part of his work in development studies at Lund University (Sweden). In 2005, he won an award from the Ruth Landes Memorial Fund (USA) to undertake fieldwork in Brazil on the social responses to the droughts that devastated parts of the country during that year.